The
COLONIAL NEWSLETTER
A Research Journal in Early American Numismatics

Volume 46, Number 3 | December 2006 | Serial Number 132

Our 46th Year

CNL - 132

MY VERY BEST REGARDS TO ERIC NEWMAN — THE IDEAL NUMISMATIC MODEL FOR YOUNG NUMISMATISTS!!

THANK YOU

US ISSN 0010-1443

1781 IMITATION BRITISH HALFPENCE UPDATE

by
Roger A. Moore, M.D.; Moorestown, NJ
David L. Palmer; Deer Park, NY
Eric P. Newman; St. Louis, MO

INTRODUCTION

Little attention was paid to the 1781-dated imitation British halfpence until 1988 when the known die varieties of both the 1781 and 1785-dated coinages were first explored.[1] Though 1781 imitation British halfpence were known to occur more frequently than the 1785-dated coins, both were considered relatively non-collectable due to their perceived rarity. Since then a number of 1781-dated coins have come onto the marketplace with continued discoveries being brought to light. The frequency of the appearance of more 1781-dated coins now allows them to be collected by variety. In addition, two new die varieties have been discovered since Newman's original paper. The purpose of this study is to update the original listing of 1781 die varieties of imitation British halfpence and provide attribution guides for their identification.

NEW DISCOVERIES

Newman 45-81C

The discovery coin for variety 45-81C was cataloged by Tom Rinaldo in the 1998 sale of Mike K. Ringo's collection of 1781 and 1785 imitation British halfpence.[2] A new obverse die is married with a previously known reverse – Newman 81C. The new obverse has not been officially described, although it was mentioned in a footnote of a 2004 paper by Byron K. Weston and Gary A. Trudgen.[3] Since the next available unused number in the sequence of obverse dies is 45, the authors agree that obverse 45 is the appropriate designation.

One feature distinguishing this obverse as a new die variety is the close spacing of the legend letters R, E, and X, which is similar to the spacing seen on obverses 40 and 46. The separation of the bottom of letter S in GEORGIVS from the back of George III's head is similar to obverses 40, 41, 42, 43 and 46. The ribbons behind George III's head in relationship to the letters GE in GEORGIVS are similar to the ribbons on obverse 43. The first ordinal in III is tilted more to the left, compared to the other known obverses. However, the most striking feature that distinguishes obverse 45 is the die break near the top posterior portion of George III's head.

Since the initial discovery of this new variety, two other examples have become known to the authors. All three coins show different extensions of the obverse die break. (See Figure 1.) From the rarity of this variety and the occurrence of the die break in each of the three known specimens, the authors presume that the obverse die broke early, perhaps as early as the first strike. Rapid progression of the failure of the obverse 45 die is what probably led to its early retirement. This

---

1. Newman, Eric P., "Were Counterfeit British Style Halfpence Dated 1785 Made Specifically for American Use?" *ANSMN 33*, The American Numismatic Society, 1988, pp. 205-23 and plates.

2. McCrawley & Grellman Auction Catalog, *The Fourth Annual C-4 Convention Sale of U.S. Colonial Coins*, cataloged by Tom Rinaldo and Mary Sauvain, November 21, 1998, lots 414-20.

3. Weston, Byron K., Trudgen, Gary A., "Central Device Punch Trial Piece of the 1781-dated Series of Counterfeit Halfpence," *The Colonial Newsletter*, April 2004, sequential pages 2639-42.

Figure 1: Obverse 45 Die Break Succession. The three known specimens of obverse 45 are shown above. The image on the left is the earliest known die state of the specimens available for study. Note the small die break over the top of George III's head that touches the bottom of the V and S in GEORGIVS. The center image shows progression of the die break with greater involvement of the legend and a slight thickening of the break. The image on the right shows further die break progression with significant involvement of the legend. The obverse 45 die probably deteriorated early in the minting process. *Images courtesy of Neil E. Rothschild (left), Roger A. Moore (center), and Gordon J. Nichols (right).*

would explain why the reverse 81C was paired with another obverse die – Newman 42. This is the only known circumstance in the 1781 coinage in which a die is paired with another die more than once. There is a notable exception, however, where a fantasy coin was struck from two 1781 obverse dies. This unique specimen is discussed below under the section on the new 46-81F variety.

Newman 46-81F

Assigning credit for the discovery coin of variety 46-81F is somewhat convoluted. Tom Rinaldo's 1998 cataloging of Mike K. Ringo's collection of 1781 and 1785 imitation halfpence indicated under lot 420 a "Double Obverse British Imitation Halfpenny – N.43 & N.45." (See Figure 2.) However, in the lot description, Rinaldo points out that what is called a N.45 is neither a Newman obverse 45 nor an obverse 42. In actuality the "45" side was the new obverse die which the present authors have designated obverse 46. Tom Rinaldo should receive credit for indicating that this was a new obverse die variety in 1998. In regard to the reverse, in an exchange of e-mails on the counterfeit halfpence eSIG in November, 2004, Clement V. Schettino posted the photograph of a 1781 coin which he indicated might be a new variety.[4] Opinion from the group was mixed, since the coin was porous and its characteristics were not easily discernable. However, the appearance of another coin on eBay in March 2005 provided positive proof of the existence of a new variety having both a new obverse and a new reverse.[5] Therefore, Clement V. Schettino is due the credit for discovering the new reverse. Based on the nomenclature previously used to describe the 1781 coinage, the next unused obverse was 46 and the next unused reverse was 81F. Interestingly within a week of this new variety being substantiated, another example was purchased on eBay from an English seller.[6]

---

4. From e-mail communications in the counterfeit halfpence eSIG group; <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ColNewsLetFndn/messages>, message number 17100 from Mike K. Ringo on November 16, 2004 and message number 17116 from Clement V. Schettino on November 17, 2004.

5. eBay Item number 3966542836, "1781 Contemporary Ctf. Halfpence Newman 40-81A?," sold by John Lorenzo on March 29, 2005 to Roger A. Moore.

6. eBay Item sold by a British dealer in April 2005 to David L. Palmer.

Obverse 43 Obverse 46

Figure 2: 1781 Double Obverse Coin. Double 1781 obverse coin with one obverse side being Newman 43 and the other obverse side the discovery Newman 46 die. *Image courtesy Mike K. Ringo.*

OBVERSE 46: This obverse is distinguished from the other varieties by the close approximation of the ribbons on the back of George III's head to the letters GE in GEORGIVS of the legend. No other variety shows such a close placement of the ribbon ends to the lettering, though obverse 41 approaches a similar relationship. The location of S in GEORGIVS is close to the head as seen in obverses 40, 41, 42, and 43. Each letter in REX is placed in close proximity to one another, as seen in obverses 40 and 45.

REVERSE 81F: This reverse is distinguished from the other varieties by the top leaf of the sprig being located under the space between the A and the N in BRITAN, as also seen on reverses 81A and 81C. The top of the number 7 in the date is slanted downward to the left and the number 8 has a defined space between its top and the bottom of the exergue line. An extension of Britannia's staff intersects at the top of the first number 1 in the date which is also seen on 81C. The stop after NIA in the legend is level with the middle of the letter A which is also seen on reverses 81B, 81D and 81E. Britannia's arm points to the middle of the upright in the letter T of the legend's BRITAN.

ATTRIBUTION GUIDES

Figure 3: 1781 Central Device Punch Trial Piece. Copper planchet that has had both the obverse and the reverse central devices impressed into its surface. Note the lack of legends, date, and detail on the shield, all of which were added to each die after the central devices had been placed using a hub produced from the master matrix. This piece is believed to have been made by using the master matrix. *Image courtesy Byron K. Weston.*

The ability to distinguish one 1781 variety from another takes time and study. Many of the differences between these varieties are very subtle and can be difficult to identify. One might wonder why the seven obverses and six reverses making up the total of seven varieties are so similar in both quality of design and detail. At least part of this question is answered in a technical paper detailing what was considered to be a 1781 central device punch trial piece. (See Figure 3.) In order to make the piece, the tools would have had to contain the reverse and intaglio images of the central devices. It is theorized that the tools used to make the piece could have been either cut down dies (doubtful), or punches used to make punches, otherwise know as master matrix central device punches. The fascinating aspect of having this piece

available for study is that it shows why all the 1781 coins look very much alike. The primary portion of the coin which was the head of George III on the obverse and the device of Britannia on the reverse are the same based upon the use of master punches. The only areas of variation occur in the placement of the legends and date. In addition the shield lines were added later since these are missing on the piece produced from the master matrix reverse punch. However, since the shield lines are on the most exposed portions of the coins, they are typically worn off early during circulation and usually not available for evaluation.

The sole significant study performed in 1988 concerning the 1781 imitation British halfpence provided the readers a written description of each variety, but most attributors relied heavily on the photographic plates. The present authors also emphasize the value of photographic plates in making positive variety identifications. In addition attribution can be aided by the use of a simple guide. Certain characteristics of each coin differ from variety to variety and can be used to help narrow down the attribution to a specific die. Many different guides could be developed based on the placement of a greater emphasis of one characteristic over another. The authors have provided a single approach to attribution, though many others are possible. (See photographic plates: Attribution of 1781 Obverses and Attribution of 1781 Reverses.) Obviously, the lower the condition of the coin, especially those having obscured or worn features, the more difficult the attribution will be. The authors caution that even after making an initial identification using the attribution guide, finalization of a decision should be delayed until a recheck of the coin is made against all of the possible varieties.

Obverse Attribution Guide – Explanation

Position of "S •" to Head: Since positions and distances are relative terms, it is necessary to refer to the actual photographs to make a proper determination. In the attribution guide at this decision point, if the S is close to the head, the variety could be 40, 41, 42, 43 or 46. If the S is more separated from the head, the variety could be 44 or 45.

Relationship of "•" to REX: In distinguishing between the obverses 40, 41, 42, 43, and 46, the presence of the dot following REX next to the lower half of the X indicates obverse 40.

Location of the Upper Ribbon to GEORGIVS: The topmost of the two loose ribbons from the back of George III's head should be evaluated in relationship to the letter E in GEORGIVS. On obverses 41 and 46 the ribbon is close to the E while on 42 and 43 the ribbon is more distant. Since "closer" and "more distant" are relative terms the photographic plate should be consulted.

Location REX "•" to Armor: On the obverse the dot following REX is closer to the armor in obverse 41 and more distant on obverse 46. Since "closer" and "more distant" are relative terms, the photographic plate should be consulted.

Location of Lower Ribbon to GEORGIVS: The lower of the two loose ribbons from the back of George III's head should be evaluated in relationship to the first G in GEORGIVS. On obverse 42 the ribbon is closer while on obverse 43 it is more distant. Since "closer" and "more distant" are relative terms, the photographic plate should be consulted.

Position of GEORGIVS to Armor: The left side of the first G in GEORGIVS is very close to George III's armor on Newman 44, while being more separated on variety 45.

Attribution plates start on sequential page 3087.

Reverse Attribution Guide – Explanation

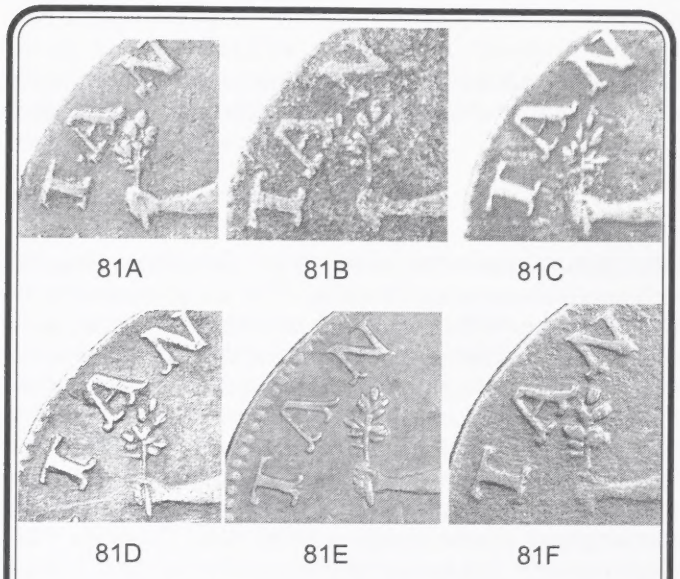

Figure 4: Sprig Position. Close-up view of the sprig on the six known 1781 counterfeit British halfpenny reverse dies. This is the key feature used in differentiating one reverse variety from another.

Figure 5: Staff Position. Close-up view of the relationship of the first number 1 of the date to the intersection of Britannia's staff with the exergue line for the six known reverse dies.

Position of Sprig: In Britannia's right hand there is an item that has been referred to variously as a spray, sprig, olive branch, twig, and a variety of other things. For the purposes of the attribution guide it will be called a sprig. When evaluating the top leaf of the sprig in relationship to the legend BRITANNIA, the top leaf lies primarily under the first A in BRITANNIA for reverse 81D, primarily between the first A and N in BRITANNIA for reverses 81A, 81C and 81F, or under the front leg of the first N in BRITANNIA in reverses 81B and 81E. The position of the top leaf of the sprig is probably the single best differentiater of reverse varieties. Once attribution is completed on a coin, it would behoove the attributor to make a comparison of all the plated sprigs with the coin being attributed, as a final check. A close-up of the sprigs for the six reverse die varieties is provided in Figure 4.

Position of Staff Over Date: Another helpful method for differentiating the reverses is the use of the position of Britannia's staff to the first number 1 in the date. Though the presented attribution guide uses this evaluation to differentiate only some of the varieties, close-ups of the position of the staff to the date are provided for all the coins in Figure 5. In evaluating the three reverses 81A, 81C, and 81F, the staff intersects the exergue line to the right of the first number 1 in the date for reverse 81A, while it is over the first number 1 in 81C,

and 81F. In differentiating the two reverses 81B from 81E, the staff intersects the exergue line over the first number 1 of the date in reverse 81B, while to the left of the first number 1 of the date in reverse 81E.

Position of NIA to Shield: For reverse 81C the final A in BRITANNIA is further from the shield compared to reverse 81F. Since "nearer" and "further" are relative terms, the photographic plate should be consulted.

DIE COMBINATIONS

Of interest is the limited number of die pairings seen in this series. Only one reverse, Newman 81C, is found with two obverses and there are no shared obverses. This is comparable to the Virginia colonial halfpence coinage where exclusive die pairing with little die sharing is the rule.[7] For the Virginia coinage the explanation is that the quality control in the Royal Mint was extremely tight, and dies were retired early, rather than chance the production of a defective product. Similar arguments cannot be made for the 1781 coinage when we realize that this was purely an imitation coinage. However, the 1781 coinage is remarkably well made and most likely utilized a central hubbing device in the manufacture of the various dies. The central device punch trial piece described earlier supports this concept. The 1781 coinage was produced by a fairly sophisticated operation and very possibly the same engraver's hand produced all the dies. Could the 1781 coinage have had a Royal Mint worker involved? The answer to this question will have to await further research, but the authors speculate that such a connection might exist.

From the seven obverse dies and six reverse dies that are presently known, a total of seven die combinations exist. In addition there is one coin that was made by combining an obverse 43 with an obverse 46. No other die combinations are known to the authors; but since two new varieties have been discovered in the last ten years, it is very possible that other varieties exist. The known die combinations are show in the photographic plate – 1781 Die Interrelationships.

CONCLUSION

The attribution of the seven obverse and six reverse die varieties that constitute the seven known die pairings of the 1781 imitation British halfpence coinage can be difficult. This paper updates the list of known varieties and provides visual attribution guides to facilitate identification of the dies.

7. Moore, Roger A., Anthony, Alan, Newman, Eric P., "Virginia Halfpence Variety Update with Revised Die Interlock Chart," *The Colonial Newsletter*, April 2005, sequential pages 2747-56.

The 1781 Die Interrelationships plate is on sequential page 3086.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank the American Numismatic Society, Gordon J. Nichols, Mike K. Ringo, Neil E. Rothschild, and Byron K. Weston for the use of their images in producing the photographic plates and figures for this paper. Specific acknowledgement for each image is provided below. In addition the authors wish to thank the ever vigilant and helpful Gary A. Trudgen for his editorial expertise.

PHOTOGRAPHIC CREDITS

Obverse and Reverse Attribution Guides and Die Interrelationship images:

40 – Neil E. Rothschild
41 – Neil E. Rothschild
42 – Eric P. Newman (ANS Photo)
43 – Eric P. Newman (ANS Photo)
44 – Mike K. Ringo
45 – Roger A. Moore
46 – David L. Palmer

81A – Neil E. Rothschild
81B – Neil E. Rothschild
81C – Byron K. Weston
81D – Roger A. Moore
81E – Mike K. Ringo
81F – David L. Palmer

1781 Die Interrelationships

40

81A

44

81E

41

81B

42

81C

45

43

81D

46

81F

Attribution of 1781 Obverses

LOCATION OF "S • " TO GEORGE III'S HEAD

CLOSE
(40, 41, 42, 43, 46)

RELATIONSHIP OF " • " TO
REX

LOW

40

MIDDLE
(41, 42, 43)

LOCATION OF
UPPER RIBBON
TO
GEORGIVS

CLOSER
(41, 46)

LOCATION OF REX " • " TO
ARMOR

CLOSER

41

MORE DISTANT

46

MORE DISTANT
(42, 43)

LOCATION OF LOWER RIBBON
TO GEORGIVS

CLOSER

42

MORE DISTANT

43

DISTANT
(44, 45)

POSITION OF
"GEORGIVS" TO ARMOR

CLOSE

44

SEPARATED

45

Attribution of 1781 Reverses

POSITION OF TOP LEAF OF SPRIG

UNDER "A" (81D)

BETWEEN "A" AND "N" (81A, 81C, 81F)

UNDER FRONT LEG OF "N" (81B, 81E)

POSITION OF STAFF OVER DATE

OVER 1781

IN FRONT OF 1781

81D

81B

81E

POSITION OF STAFF OVER DATE

AFTER 1781

OVER 1781 (81C, 81F)

POSITION OF NIA TO SHIELD

FURTHER FROM SHIELD

NEARER TO SHIELD

81A

81C

81F